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Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance

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Stephanie Leigh Batiste

Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011. xx + 326 pp. (Paper US\$ 25.95)

Darkening Mirrors takes off from Stephanie Leigh Batiste's notice that an array of black performances from the late 1920s to the mid-1940s share a common interest in empire. Batiste includes a diversity of material in the category of "black performance." Her chapters examine a promotional film made for the black resort of Idlewild, Michigan; an inter- and intraracial melodrama by the bootstrap independent black film director Oscar Micheaux; a black-cast singing Western; the Federal Theater Project's "Negro Unit" productions of *Macbeth*, *Haiti*, and *The Mikado*; Katherine Dunham's choreography; an off-Hollywood B-movie called *The Devil's Daughter* that was filmed in Jamaica; and the Hollywood, all-star, black-cast musical *Stormy Weather*. As this list might imply, Batiste also includes a variety of locales in her category of "empire": the American Midwest and West, the Caribbean, (especially Haiti), Japan, and the South Pacific.

Through careful analysis, Batiste aims to "pinpoint ... black peoples' use of representational structures that sustained the imperial project [a project that created the category of 'black people'], and how black people changed those structures" (p. xiii). Performance—whether live or filmed, dramatic or musical, popular and generic or explicitly aesthetic and anti-generic—is a privileged object of analysis for Batiste because it is elusive and multiple. She argues that performance is especially suited to presenting complexities and contradictions, and it is these features of her archive that most interest her. She sees these depression-era performances as offering blacks (both artists and audiences) venues for criticizing racism in the United States and developing a black diasporic identity critical of U.S. imperialism. At the same time, the performances also make the case for blacks as Americans and are thus engaged in and even rely on U.S. imperialism. Put differently, Batiste sees these performances as deeply connected with power, both in the United States and projected around the globe, and with African Americans imagining themselves as having power—and, thereby, seeking power, even becoming "complicit" with it, rather than just resisting it.

The strongest section of *Darkening Mirrors* is its three central chapters on the Federal Theatre Project and Dunham (whose *L'Ag'Ya*, the dance Batiste focuses on, was staged by the FTP). The density of the FTP's archive, along with the available materials on some of the artists themselves (including Dunham), aids Batiste in tracking the complexities, layers, and clashes of intent

and agency that undergirded the so-called “voodoo” *Macbeth*, as well as *Haiti* (which dramatized the revolution), *The Swing Mikado*, and Dunham’s choreography (which was informed by her anthropological training with Melville Herskovits and her fieldwork across the Caribbean). The centrality to the FTP of the nation, national renovation, and nation-building—and the bald (and not unnoticed at the time) contradictions of a progressive national project having explicitly segregated units—also helps Batiste focus her argument. That these shows were all live and now exist only in fragmentary records also pushes Batiste to pay particular attention to issues of reception, keeping the labile aspects of black American performance front and center. The chapters focused on films offer some illuminating and well contextualized readings of *texts*, but the (comparative) stability of the film, as a recording or construction of a performance, along with the less complete and often frustratingly missing archives around these films’ productions and receptions, make these chapters less uniformly robust than those on the FTP.

Batiste’s capacious sense of the United States’ imperial imagination is a strength of *Darkening Mirrors*. For those familiar with some of the works she examines (and few readers will know them all), the combinations and juxtapositions her analyses create will be refreshing. Batiste’s reading of *Stormy Weather*, which I know well, gave me new things to think about. But some readers may find Batiste’s focus at once a bit diffuse and a bit narrow. Because of the variability of her archive, chapters can be very different in their depth, and Batiste doesn’t extend her readings or her argument past 1944, the year of *Stormy Weather*. The extensive prologue and introduction in *Darkening Mirrors* do an excellent job of laying out the book’s concerns and ideas. It is testament to the book’s strengths that I wanted more of a conclusion—not a resolution of the complexities and contradictions Batiste so vividly describes and analyzes, but rather some suggestions about how she saw African American engagements with imperial representation in performance continuing—or not—after World War II.

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